

# **Open letter of the scientific community regarding the issue of the Białowieża Forest<sup>1</sup>**

**Translation from Polish unauthorised by authors.**

As representatives of the scientific world, for the sake of the Polish nature and Poland's image in the international arena, we wish to raise a strong objection to the decision of the Minister of the Environment, approving of the plan to increase the limit of timber extraction in the Białowieża Forest, and to the actions contained in the Plan for the Białowieża Forest<sup>2</sup>, developed by the Ministry of the Environment and the Director General of the State Forests.

The Białowieża Forest is the only UNESCO natural world heritage site in Poland and the best preserved forest complex in the European Plain. It was created and shaped by natural processes, with little human impact compared to other European forests. The Białowieża Forest, protected since the 15th century and little transformed in the past, is to a considerable extent a natural forest with well-preserved plant and animal communities, characterised by enormous biodiversity. Despite being crippled by uncontrolled logging in the beginning of the 20th century and subjected to forest management in a considerable area, it has remained a natural site unique in Europe and recognised across the world, a Poland's flagship and a cause for pride for many generations of Poles.

The plan of increasing timber logging in the Białowieża Forest to suppress the outbreak of the European spruce bark beetle is an intervention into the Forest's natural processes. It might lead to a substantial part of the Białowieża Forest transforming into a managed forest and the most valuable areas losing their the natural character, which consequently could cause the forfeiture of the World Heritage Site status. The current bark beetle outbreak is one of many such events that were recorded in the Forest's history. It triggers a natural transformation of tree stands and their adaptation to climate change, and does not pose a threat to the continuity of the Białowieża Forest, nor to its biodiversity. This outbreak, although it is making a large number of spruce trees die, is not a threat to their presence in the Białowieża Forest, as the spruce regenerates naturally. It must also be kept in mind that the high percentage of the spruce in some forest communities is a result of human disturbances in the previous centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.zbs.bialowieza.pl/artykul/896.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Program for the Białowieża Forest as the cultural and natural UNESCO-heritage and the area of Natura 2000 network" [https://www.mos.gov.pl/fileadmin/user\\_upload/mos/Aktualnosci/marzec\\_2016/Program\\_-\\_Bialowieza\\_-\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.mos.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/mos/Aktualnosci/marzec_2016/Program_-_Bialowieza_-_ENG.pdf)

We firmly object to the statements made in the Plan for the Białowieża Forest as well as the opinions expressed publicly by the Minister of the Environment about the anthropogenic origin of the Białowieża Forest and the deterioration of the conservation status of the Natura 2000 habitats and species due to ceased bark beetle control. These views are inconsistent with the scientific knowledge and they undermine the uniqueness of the Białowieża Forest and its World Heritage site status, thereby tarnishing the image of the Polish nature and Poland's image in the world. In addition, they undermine the scientific reliability and contradict the results of long-term studies carried out in the Białowieża Forest by Polish and foreign researchers from a number of scientific institutions.

We urge the academic community, the Polish society and the international community to firmly object to the plans of increasing timber logging in the Forest and to the long-term experiment drafted in the Ministry's Plan for the Białowieża Forest, which shall lead to irrevocable loss of its naturalness and deterioration of the conservation status of its habitats and species. The whole of the Białowieża Forest deserves to be protected.

We appeal to the President, the *Sejm*<sup>3</sup> of the Republic of Poland and the President of the Council of Ministers for taking action to protect the whole of the Białowieża Forest as a national park. That Poland owns such a valuable natural heritage is not only a cause for pride, it also imposes an obligation to ensure that it is maintained in unimpaired condition for future generations.

Białowieża, 8 April 2016

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